

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Toshiba printer close to letter quality

Reliable notions about different types of printers aren't as reliable anymore. Laser printers aren't as expensive as they used to be, letter-quality printers aren't as slow, and the output from dot-matrix printers isn't as ugly.

Toshiba's P351C Model 2, a 24-pin dot-matrix printer, provides an excellent example of the ways in which the old distinctions are blurring. It is fast — 100 characters a second. It has the best print quality of any 24-pin machine that I've seen. And it has a unique capability: It can print in any one of four colors without changing the ribbon.

But there is a problem — the price. At \$1,599, I'm not sure that the print quality is appreciably better than other 24-pin printers. But for people who also need color, it shines.

Here's why:



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✓ The print quality is excellent. While still not as good as a typewriter, daisy-wheel or laser printer, it is better than any other dot-matrix I've seen. The term often misused by salesmen, "near-letter quality," definitely applies here. No dot-matrix on the market actually duplicates letter quality, but this one comes close.

✓ It's a well-designed, classy-looking machine with easy-to-understand controls.

✓ It has a push-and-pull, front and rear tractor feed that makes it virtually impossible for continuous-feed forms to get off track.

✓ For color printing, you can use a ribbon with black, red, blue and yellow; or you can pop in a plain black ribbon for day-to-day use. This way, you don't use up just one band on a four-color ribbon.

Given all this, what might keep

you from choosing the Toshiba for your office? To begin with, it has two of the same problems discovered with the Star Micronics NB-15 discussed in this column last week. Despite hours of trying, I couldn't configure it perfectly with Word Perfect, my favorite word processing software. And it did not operate very long before breaking down. It gave out after 2,500 invoices.

Printer manufacturers have a choice: They can either emulate a popular printer so that all software will run with it, or they can choose to have more features and create programming headaches. If they choose the complicated route, they can't claim innocence when people have trouble making it work.

Within Word Perfect for example, I was not able to change colors easily. A short program had to be written to change the color before entering Word Perfect — and then I was stuck with that color alone until it was changed again. And that wasn't all. When I printed underlined text, the text appeared in

one color and the underlining in another, namely the color below the one I had selected on the ribbon. This produced some strikingly attractive effects, but it was obviously not the intent of the maker.

Finally, the ribbon life on the Toshiba machine had a ridiculously short life, and was very expensive. By way of comparison, the ribbon on the Star NB-15 lasted nearly three times as long, and cost \$10.95. The Toshiba ribbon cost \$16.95.

Even without the problems I've just mentioned, the price of \$1,599 seems high.

Nonetheless, the Toshiba P351C Model 2 could serve well in a low-volume setting where near-letter-quality print is acceptable, and where color capability is required.

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